



The Man on the Volcano: A Portrait of Werner Herzog

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The Man on the Volcano: A Portrait of Werner Herzog

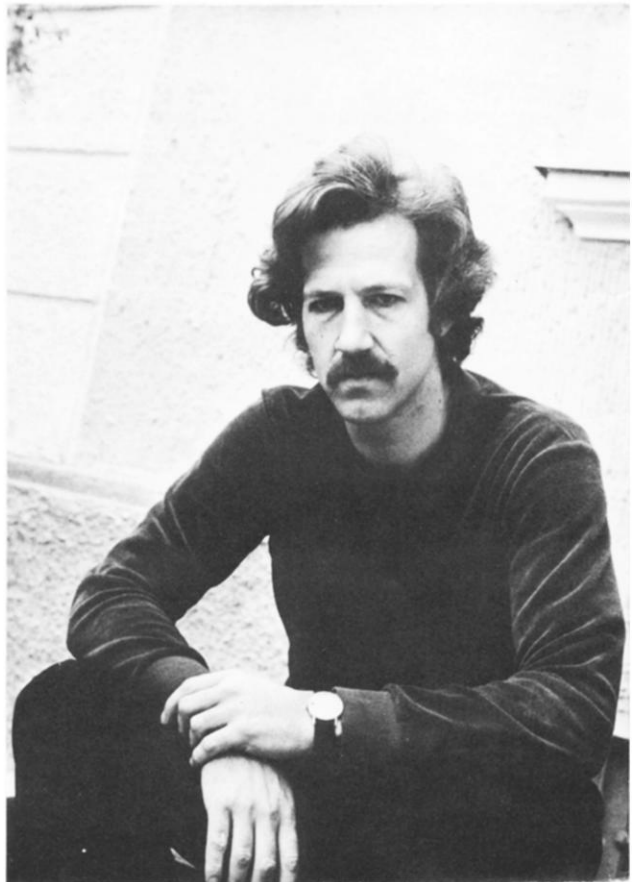
What disturbs and attracts us at once in any film by the young German film director Werner Herzog is his total disregard for the subtle traditions of compromise. Nothing is sacred; least of all the established language of the cinema. Frontally, physically, we are exposed to loneliness, frailty, fear; but also to strength, confidence, self-reliance. Perhaps no other film-maker has ever so extolled the innocent spirit of man, and few have so clearly shown how little space it is accorded in modern life.

In describing the characters he prefers to depict, I find myself using terms that would also apply to Werner Herzog himself. Directness of approach, disdain for social conventions, naïveté, fearlessness, immediacy, doing everything by oneself, reliance on the tangible things alone, a love for objects and nature, the implacable drive to conquer obstacles. Herzog has come to the cinema as his heroes make their first appearances in his films: suddenly, there is physical presence.

Despite the fact that a myth has grown up around him, nobody could be less of a riddle than Herzog. He answers his own telephone, lives with a wife and a son in a suburb of Munich, cuts his films in a spare room in his mother's house, where he also keeps a sound transfer machine in his old bedroom, drives the production van all the way from Bavaria to the Western coast of Ireland and back again, while his three-man crew sleep in the back, skis and plays soccer to perfection, and will answer interviewers' questions, despite their repetitiveness, with the same freshness and innocence that he applies to every new film project. "The only way to stop smoking," he says, "is to stop smoking." He has applied the same principle to film-making.

This Huckleberry Finn of the movies is now 35, but has been using cameras since he was 19, when

he decided that there was no point in submitting scripts to producers and took a factory job to finance his first shorts. Although Germany had lost its film industry in the war and its talented film people even earlier through emigration, the mid-sixties saw a revival of interest in the craft and young people were openly rebelling, writing manifestos and attacking the sclerotic traditions that had petrified the commercial cinema. Everybody was suddenly making movies.



PHOTOS BY GIDEON BACHMANN

Oberhausen, a grey town in the Ruhr coal district, an unlikely place for the renaissance of a visual art form, sported a yearly, wintery film festival, where nobody ever left the warm uterus of the town's art hall, and where incessant screenings, round-the-clock protest meetings, and tons of German sausage consumed in the smoky corridors joined to create what must now with some nostalgia be considered a revolutionary atmosphere. Werner Herzog got his first film prize here. It was for his fourth short, the most expensive he had made. *Last Words* had cost what was then the equivalent of about \$7500. A lot of money for a welder in 1967.

There was never any question in Herzog's mind that he was destined to become a major filmmaker. Probably artists wouldn't be what they are if they didn't have this faith, but there was really not much he had to go on, besides his stubbornness and conviction. He had no money, no connections, no training. He was a difficult child; his mother says that when he was young, he was always in a rage, it was his nature. According to her, he never had real friends, couldn't create real contacts, and would sit for hours in his room staring at an object. He didn't have to study, she says, he just knew everything.

"Werner remembers the slightest details; he knows, sees, understands. But explaining is not his nature. Everything goes into him and comes out transformed. He can't bear to see suffering, but the idea of death makes him fight. Although I think that when he had himself converted to Catholicism at the age of 15 it was because the local priest played soccer."

From the very beginning Herzog tackled his own fate, steered his own course. "I decided there was no point in wasting time in growing up, so I went straight from youth to being about 35, to accepting responsibilities."

To accept responsibilities meant to become a film-maker, meant to deal creatively with his obsessions. It also meant that private life and work became one, that the line between fact and invention became indistinct. The stories that Herzog tells about his own life began sounding vaguely like scenarios. When he tells three interviewers three diverging stories about a fight he had with the actor Klaus Kinsky in the middle of the Ama-

zon jungle, all three versions sound authentic. But when I question a friend of mine who was present at the time, it becomes clear that all three are invented.

Herzog, almost surely the most important new film director of the current generation (and I am saying "almost" because one does not, after all, see everything), refuses the interpretation that in part he invents his life as he goes along. To him who embroiders every version of a story with detail, atmosphere and quotes, it doesn't seem like invention. But it is precisely this conviction that there is no separation between fact and what the fact has become in his mind which then transmits to us so strongly the feeling that his visions have general meaning. A good part of the secret of his filmmaking success lies in this ability to convince the viewer that Herzog's version of truth is in fact truth.

By now, Werner Herzog has made six feature films and ten shorter ones, none of which have failed to arouse controversy, but the fascination we feel is not primarily for the films: it is for the man behind them, for this child-like adventurer, who has dared to break the cardinal rule of the cinema: that no man can make films alone. And one who uses the freedom he has conquered for non-selfish purposes. Because Werner Herzog, despite everything, is not interested in success.

What he is interested in, and why he makes films, can only be termed a mission: the physical contest with life, the need to cleanse the human soul of the age's impurities, the dedication to the idea of work, the responsibility to history. "Nothing in my life," he says, "is a question of choice; the thing wants out. I have always known that I was going to make films, and I always know what the next one will be."

Thomas Mauch, the cameraman who shot all the early Herzog shorts and features, relates the story of their first meeting. Herzog was a totally unknown youngster, and they met in a Munich café. Herzog suggested Mauch work with him, since he would soon, without doubt, become Germany's most important film director. It is to Mauch's credit that he believed him; the man's conviction carried the weight which has now been proven by history.



THE ENIGMA OF KASPAR HAUSER

Herzog would be the first to object to the telling of this story, but it is not atypical. In fact, many accuse him of megalomania, but none deny him their admiration, certainly an uncommon combination. With awe, they repeat the stories he himself readily disburses: how he walked, one cold winter, all the way from Munich to Paris carrying a print of his most successful film to date, *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*, to show to Lotte Eisner, a film historian he admires, who was then ill in hospital. "I had to do something for her. I simply knew that by the time I got there, she would be out of hospital. And she was."

Or the story of the 350 monkeys he stole at a South American jungle airport by posing as a health inspector, because he felt that their sale to a high-bidding American by the Indians who had originally caught them for use in the end sequence

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of his film *Aguirre Wrath of God* was unfair, especially to the monkeys, who would certainly prefer scurrying back into the jungle after the filming to ending up in Florida zoos.

Or threatening the Greek army with firearms when it wanted to break up his shooting of a large-scale fireworks scene in *Life Signs*, his first feature, shot in Crete. Surprisingly to all but Herzog himself the colonels then in power seem to have relented as easily as the dumbfounded South American airport police.

One of his favorites is how he got up in the middle of cutting a film in Munich because he overheard a radio report of an anticipated volcano eruption in Guadeloupe. He flew off there with his cameraman the very same afternoon, to shoot a documentary about a native farmer half-way up the slopes of the threatened mountain who, the radio had said, refused evacuation. The volcano, perhaps impressed by the mustachioed, unshaven intruder with the camera on his back, and despite the forecast and the 75,000 evacuees, didn't erupt. Herzog is convinced it couldn't, anyway. "We treated it with great disrespect, Jörg and I walked all the way up to the crater and pissed in it. The matter of fear doesn't come up. Nobody else could have made the film, and somebody had to. I suppose you will realize from this that in some way I must have resolved the death question."

One believes him, almost ashamed that one is likely to apply the brakes of reason. But it doesn't matter, of course, whether what he says actually happened. What does matter is that one considers him, without wanting to, as a sort of prophet. What is much more complicated to discern is the prophecy he imparts. It is also the one thing he himself seems to have difficulty defining. So far, he has refused all attempts by outsiders to define it.

"People have pre-established ways of thinking, they are always defining me. But I am not a 'German romantic' as they called me in *Playboy*; I have very little to do with expressionism, as has so often been claimed, even by Chabrol; I am not a 'typically 19th-century artist' as Thomas Mauch calls me in his film about me; in fact, I am not 'German' in that generic sense. I am Bavarian, of the late Middle Ages. I am physical." Mauch

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insists that Herzog wanted to be considered, instead, a 16th-century artisan, "a ridiculous idea. He has nothing to do with the Renaissance. He is a mystic." Which Herzog again denies.

What he is sure of is his attachment to the physical world. Apparently he broke his leg twice: once when leaping out of a boarding-house window in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for obscure reasons, and once playing soccer, when defending the honor of his club, the Black-Yellows of Munich. His preferred photograph of himself shows him upside-down in mid-air, an embryonic shape in full winter gear with a childish joy on his face, caught in the midst of one of his many shows of prowess above a snowy slope during the shooting of *Heart of Glass*. He loves jumping and cavorting, and often forces his crew to follow his lead. Alan Greenberg reports walking with him one day in a forest and throwing a snowball at a faraway tree. He hit it dead center, unfortunately, because Herzog then forced each member of the crew to do likewise before they were allowed to walk on.

In *Heart of Glass*, in fact, the film he shot in 1976 in Wyoming, Alaska, Utah, Bavaria, Switzerland and the Skellig Rock islands off the West Coast of Ireland, he pushed physicality to the extreme: he hypnotized all the actors to obtain a trance-like movement and a uniformity he considers impossible to achieve otherwise. Instructions were whispered in low tones to differentiate them from the technical instructions spoken in a normal voice to the crew. "If I had spoken normally, all the hypnotized actors would automatically have followed all the instructions I was giving the cameraman. Hypnotizing the actors wasn't, however, an attempt to control them more completely, as has been suggested. It was a stylistic effort. I wanted this air of the floating, fluid movements, the rigidity of a culture caught in decline and superstition, the atmosphere of prophecy."

Werner H. Stipetic (Herzog's real name) is a 1942 Virgo who spent the first 11 years of his life poor in a small Bavarian mountain village with his two brothers and his mother, whom he later followed to Munich, where he's lived ever since. Of his father he speaks with respect as a mixture of scientist and clochard, a man who never got anything off the ground throughout his life except



AGUIRRE WRATH OF GOD

a series of marriages and relationships with women, off whom he lived, fathering small tribes of children in various places. From him, Herzog says, he learned a lot: what not to do. But he admires his grandfather, an archaeologist who excavated the Esculapeion on the island of Kos. When Herzog was 15, he went off to Greece to retrace the old man's steps, and finally shot his first feature there.

A good part of his life has been spent on the road. The Congo, where he got arrested, or was it Uganda? "They were violating the women," he says, "and they wouldn't believe that we were not mercenaries. Why would we be spending the hottest time of the year on the fringes of the Sahara?" In fact, he was shooting a documentary feature there, *Fata Morgana*. "It was the only time of the year in which we might hope to see a real one, an apparition, a *fata morgana*. Later, with seven



EVEN DWARFS STARTED SMALL

Africans, he rented an apartment in Manchester, for a few abortive months of study, before transferring to Pennsylvania. "The first time I really got out from under," he relates, "is when I walked into Albania. It was one of those things that I needed to do."

His favorite film, *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1969), was shot in the Canary Islands. It is a doom-laden *Animal Farm* and his most pessimistic statement on the *condition humaine*, and in it, as in all his films, the landscape plays a dramatic role. Jungles, deserts, islands, and mountain gorges are his favorite haunts, the more remote and inhospitable the better. This geographical restlessness perfectly parallels his mental one: the story of his life and the stories of his films are one continual struggle to overcome obstacles he himself alone sees, has created, or puts in the way of his films' heroes.

An innocent is thrown into the world, unprepared, encounters despair and destruction, fights with the means at his disposal, suffers, rebels, and loses, leaving behind an emptier, more desperate landscape. This, in a nutshell, has been the story line of each film Herzog has made. In each one he stresses one or another part of this odyssey, sometimes concentrating more on the individual and sometimes more on the society which that individual inevitably fights. All the films, practically, are descriptions of routes to death, but all are permeated by strapping life forces, by the sound of rebellious, impotent fury, by the threat of irrevocable fate.

Whether the self-destruction is as disdainful as in *Aguirre*, in which an upstart Spanish commander in the Incan era proclaims himself master

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of the continent when vultures are already pecking at his feverish eyes after he has managed to destroy all those about him in a vainglorious search for Eldorado; or mystical as in *Heart of Glass*, in which a shepherd prophet preannounces the end that will engulf his village; or symbolic of the low that slumbers in us all, as in his drive to break taboos in *Dwarfs*, in which a society of Lilliputians explodes into anarchy and wilful rupture of the rules that make us human; or even compassionate as in *Kaspar Hauser* and in his latest film, *Stroszek*, in both of which the main role is played by a somewhat half-witted Berlin factory worker of obscure origins, released into the world at the age of 23 from a long line of asylums and institutions—the films are all records of doomed struggles. But hardly ever in the history of the cinema has the depiction of doom carried so strong a message of life.

This in fact is probably as close as one can come to interpreting Herzog's prophecy: the come-uppance but probable end, in our epoch, of the idea of physical man, seen not philosophically or politically in the standard way as the individual fighting society, but as the animal fighting the machine, as the spirit of the species in a last, desperate sortie fighting the separation from the body.

Almost as if to assure himself of the continuity of the spirit, Herzog tends to use the same actors in practically the same roles and to repeat scenes within cycles of films. In *Stroszek* Bruno S., the actor of *Kaspar Hauser*, sets his truck off on a driverless, circular track, an image of desolation and of civilization's futility lifted bodily from *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, and Clemens Scheitz, the actor who played the glass factory owner's valet in *Heart of Glass*, enlarges and enhances his seconding role, accompanying a main character to doom, in *Stroszek*. It enlarges our understanding of the depth of a character depicted to know, for example, that Bruno's end (death? we do not know) on an out-of-operation snowlift in *Stroszek* relates to other uses of the same symbol in Herzog, for example the snowlifts in his *The Great Ecstasy of Wood-Sculptor Steiner*, which is the story of a man obsessed by ski-jumping.

As Herzog advances deeper into ability and acceptance, he tends to expect more of this second-

level understanding from his audiences, almost as if he were sure that those of today had seen his work of yesterday. *Stroszek*, a difficult film in itself, depicting a backwoods America seen through the eyes of immigrant naïfs, assumes its full meaning only when seen as a microcosm of Herzog's preoccupations: to give voice to the defeated in a magnificent but deathly pyre. As always in a Herzog film one begins to wonder how he manages to exclude himself from the doom he sees us all heading for.

Because he quite clearly does, and perhaps this exclusion is what has made so many of his critics consider him presumptuous. Talking to him about any subject calls forth the most convinced replies, and his scripts are full of definitive statements, more definitive than those of science, anyway. It becomes ever more complicated not to mix up Herzog with the characters he invents. I find myself in that cutting room in his mother's apartment in Munich, quite capable of imagining him on a jutting rock deep in a Swiss valley, holding forth like Jeremiah to a group of fallen Swiss Children of God. Thank God I don't believe his modesty; it would have done little for Jeremiah, too.

One gets the feeling that thought and its dressing in language—communication—is but a neces-

sary evil to him, and he does not, in fact, excel at it. In his citified Bavarian, interspersed with frequent "Gell's" ("Isn't it?" or "Don't you agree?") he makes you feel pretty silly for trying to understand his message with words. After all, that's not what he deals in. But he submits to questions (and that is the proper verb) because all means are justifiable when it comes to reaching people. Even critics may be instrumental in getting the films seen. And that is important to him.

What he does deal with is images, and apologetically (because of the comparison) he explains that the impressionists, or Michelangelo, or the cubist, changed our view of the world, our understanding of structures of the soul, through the updating of our feelings concerning light, space, environment, nature. "My characters have no shadows. They come out of the darkness, and such people have no shadows, the light hurts them. They are there, and then gone, to their obscurity. My films are instinctual, anthropological. I am not a theoretical person. I know that I have the ability to articulate images that sit deeply inside us, that I can make them visible. It is an athletic endeavor, like life itself. Things work inside of me for a long time, images become clearer, and at a certain point I just sit down and write the script in three days. There is always a key image; everything

HEART OF GLASS:

Clemens Scheitz
(background)
warns of doom in
his first role
in a Herzog
film: the glass
factory owner's
valet.



emerges from that, physically, not by analysis. I remember my childhood in isolated images, although it didn't last long. Once I saw God, maybe he was just a worker from the village, but he just stood there in the doorway one night when I was afraid and had crept under the bed, and I looked at him, and that's when I stopped being afraid."

Herzog is proud of being able to be alone, of not being afraid, although he won't say in so many words now that he isn't. But what he believes to be his achievements are that he thinks he could live totally alone if there was nobody left in the world (although, he adds, "despite my better judgement, I love and need people"); that he can do everything by himself, every physical thing that needs doing, and that he'd thus prefer to lose his eyesight rather than his legs; that he needs to show to the world that "one is still here"; and that he is sure that through film-making he will meet, as he has already done on occasion, brother souls who would help him in need, who sit there in the dark like him and suddenly realize, as he does when an inspired work explodes upon their senses, that they are no longer alone.

Even though he refuses definitions, he is convinced that he is engaged in a work that is bigger than he is, that what he has to do is beyond the private sphere and fulfils a historical calling. But he refuses the idea of the camera as a weapon, considering it rather a protector. Up on that vibrating volcano he felt safe behind it, and in a street fight he would enter without hesitation into any foray, where without a camera he thinks he would probably hide. "Fear," he says, "is not a function of danger, but a question of one's personal relationship to death." He doesn't seek death, he claims, but wouldn't avoid it, either, if a project would call for a risk that might entail it. That is why he doesn't feel anybody else would take the needed risks for documenting, for example, the death-disdain of that lonely Caribbean farmer who refused to be evacuated.

The concentration on the theme of man alone, of the human being in the wilderness, cultural or topographic, of loneliness and singularity of purpose, of the inability to express and to communicate the things that join men, has led Herzog to what may be considered one of his most important stylistic elements: silence. "Can you not

hear around you," he has Kaspar Hauser say, "the terrible screaming we normally call silence?" On his sets, he says, he directs things in silence, especially on *Heart of Glass*, where pregnant silence was the dominant formal element. To anger he responds with it, and with his cameraman he claims to communicate through it. With his cutter it is at the base of their daily struggle. He breaks it only against his inner wish.

Silence also expresses, for Herzog, the refusal of the compromise which is inherent in the use of words. In a world where words and images—reproductions of meaning—have replaced feeling and action, he refuses to use these conventions in the standard way. Silence and the use of images in an unexpected fashion are his method for refusing the standard. It is what he thinks great artists have done in all epochs. But he does use sound, and he does use photography, editing, orchestration of visual rhythms, juxtaposition, dramatic construction and the physical method of showing films to large audiences in cinemas, in other words, all the standard cinematographic conventions. It is a choice he has had to make, but one is tempted to think that he makes films only because he hasn't been able to invent a more direct method to reach hearts. Most likely this is the basic compromise of his life.

He has tried others. His self-conversion to Catholicism at 15 was a compromise he undertook in order to assist in "the elimination of the drawbacks of the Church." He quickly gave up, still considering the religious dichotomy—to accept responsibility while relinquishing it, at the same time, to a higher being—to be insoluble in this age. He tried words alone, submitting poems to competitions and little magazines in Germany and the USA, and once winning, under different pseudonyms, three of the twelve top poetry prizes in a single German radio contest. And he tries, again and again, to make friends, hardly ever getting, even with his closest collaborators, beyond the most formal stage. And then, of course, there is the family.

"I am not a bad father, but my family life is not always the most normal. For the first 2 or 2½ years after marriage, I didn't live with my wife. And my son—I've told him to call me Herzog—I don't think I've accepted him yet as my son.

For a long time I had no idea who or what he was. I still don't, really. I just know that children—that is a law above us, to be fulfilled. At the age of 16 my son will be adult, will see my films, will fight me. Can I face him then? So now, when I make them, I have a feeling he is there, looking over my shoulder."

Actually, there is very little insecurity in Herzog where his films are concerned. "My son may not end up liking them, but I know now, that for the ones I have made, I needn't be ashamed. People will still look at them in 200 years. They are part of a whole, one builds and enhances the other; that is why they do not age . . . they have all come out of an inner necessity; they, too, are like my children. Without children, our world would be a sorry place."

Something of Herzog's relationship to his son, both the love and the embarrassment of it, is reflected in his relationship to his crews, whom he considers essential collaborators in his success, but with whom he does not, in the end, manage to establish more than respect and dependence. And it is also reflected in his treatment of actors, journalists, helpers of all sorts who flock to him, and probably women. In the best cases, he manages to give all these the feeling of participating in a major, important undertaking. In the worst ones, he exploits them; as artists, and especially filmmakers, have always done. The human material is part of the raw material of their craft. In Herzog's case, that is normal. Everything to him is raw material.

When the raw material is not to his liking, his ability to invent reality comes into full force. Often he imagines a landscape and only then seeks it, and has found that nature bends to his fantasy. Mauch, who has gone on trips of verification with him, isn't convinced. "You finally get there, 650 miles from the nearest habitation, down those jungle streams, and the promised rapids, in which a raft is said to have been caught and remained turning about itself until all aboard starved, turns out to be a fairly common whirlpool. We had to rig it all with ropes and use camera angles to make it look dangerous. But I know that Herzog believes his vision: to him that spot in the river was what he had seen in his dream, and after all, he had travelled by helicopter and

canoe for thousands of miles to find it. It had to be right."

In fact, in a recent interview, Herzog describes in detail how all his Indian actors had to be removed nightly, with mortal danger, from the incessantly turning raft, and taken out there again every morning, when the famous scene for *Aguirre* was finally shot. And more invention: "It is those Indians who are the real heroes of the film. They belonged to a socialist cooperative and wanted to do something for their race. I had told them we were making a film to show how it had been exploited." But I also have a tape upon which an assistant of Herzog's tells me how she went and chose the Indian extras in a nearby market town. "By the way," she adds, "I do not mind at all that his stories do not jell. Of course he exploits people. Of course he is self-centered. Of course he stylizes everything into fantasy. All that doesn't change the fact that he is totally honest as a filmmaker."

Herzog himself is convinced that he does not change the reality of people and things by using them. "You will note that none of the people are deformed, not even the dwarfs. What is deformed, or rather deforming, are the objects, the monstrous subjugations, the education models, the table manners. I never touch the identity of the people, I merely present them on a very specific stylistic level. This helps me establish a perspective from which to make the inner states of mind transparent. The dwarfs, for example, are like an essence, a concentrated form of what men are.

STROSZEK: Clemens Scheitz (center) and Bruno S. (right) repeat roles—from *HEART OF GLASS* and *KASPAR HAUSER* respectively. The film is set in Wisconsin.



States of ecstasy or of non-participation in normal social exchange which my characters go through help me to find my way in the darkness towards new images, new comprehensions of ourselves. My heroes may thus seem far away from it all, but they are not far away from themselves."

He doesn't have a target audience, no specific group he wishes to address. "All I can say is that I am sure that my films encounter people, somewhere, who are still burning, still alive. One has to prove that one is still here! I meet these people, sometimes, when I watch them come out of a

cinema after a film of mine. But I am not seeking 'remnants of humanity,' as many have said, but the autonomous and the strong. Who has been frightened sees more. Perhaps I seek certain utopian things, space for human honor and respect, landscapes not yet offended, planets that do not exist yet, dreamed landscapes. Very few people seek these images today which correspond to the time we live, pictures that can make you understand yourself, your position today, our status of civilization. I am one of the ones who try to find those images."

MARSHA KINDER

The Art of Dreaming in *Three Women* and *Providence*: Structures of the Self

Three Women (written and directed by Robert Altman) and *Providence* (written by David Mercer and directed by Alain Resnais) are both reaffirming the self and human creativity on three levels of experience—dreams, conscious artistry, and social interaction. They suggest that life is a creation dominated by subjective projections of an auteur, who must make courageous aesthetic choices while accepting the limits of the structures through which one moves (with their beginnings, middles, and ends) and which operate within the self. Both films mediate between suicide and self-regeneration, but with different emphases and resolutions. Altman's *Three Women* is primarily concerned with new beginnings. Focusing on birth, the film opens with a startling sequence that plunges us into the depths of highly con-

densed visual dream images out of which the rest of the narrative slowly grows: a pregnant woman painting on the inner walls of a swimming pool an Egyptian mural of serpentine figures—a strange animal sits before two females whose limbs are intertwined, one seeming to help the other whose head is thrust back; another female sits beneath an authoritative male with outstretched arms and huge dangling phallus. Then, the image dissolves into decrepit bodies moving in circles through steamy therapeutic pools as they await death in limbo. Resnais and Mercer's film focuses on endings. Opening with the written word *Providence*, mounted on an elegant structure, the narrative pulls us through a scrambled series of fictional scenes, including repetitions and variations, and unexpectedly combining humor and